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SUBJECT: ISTANBUL'S AK PARTY WOMEN: GETTING (RELATIVELY)  
FIRED UP

Sensitive but Unclassified -- not for internet distribution.

1. (SBU) Summary: Turkey's ruling Justice and Development Party (AKP) Istanbul Women's Branch celebrated the 71st anniversary of women's suffrage in Turkey December 5 with a panel discussion focused on expanding the role of women in politics. AKP remains a party in which women do the grassroots work necessary to win elections, but still have no real leadership or decision making roles. However, one NGO panelist urged the audience to "pressure" party officials for change, adding that being elected and serving in party administration are what count most, and calling for changes to the political party law to allow women's branches of parties to control funds specifically for women candidates. The audience responded enthusiastically. A more subdued panel moderator suggested a softer tone might be more effective in pushing the women's agenda within the party. End Summary.

2. (SBU) Standing room only: AKP MP Burhan Kuzu, AKP Istanbul Municipal Assembly member Belma Satir, and KADER President Seyhan Eksioglu participated as panelists at the event, held in a packed meeting room at a downtown hotel. (Note: KADER is a nonpartisan NGO devoted to training women candidates in Turkey. End note.) Kuzu and Satir explored themes ranging from a comparative history of suffrage movements, to statistics about women's political representation in Turkey and other European countries, and the pros and cons of quota systems. It was KADER's Eksioglu, however, who stole the show with her rousing and specific proposals to the AK Party women to "pressure" party officials for change. Voting is not enough, she asserted, adding that being elected and serving in party administration are what matter.

3. (SBU) Can't Run on your Husband's Money: Eksioglu called for a campaign outside the party, as well, targeting the political party law. Asserting that the current role of parties' women's branches consists of nothing more than supporting the men in their party to win elections (Comment: From what we've observed of AKP politics, she is right on the mark. End Comment), she urged that existing legislation be amended to allow party women's branches to raise and allocate money specifically for female candidates. While the AK Party Women's Branch moderator of the panel was subdued, the audience received Eksioglu's remarks with enthusiastic applause.

4. (SBU) "Proper Attitude and Language": The moderator intervened as Eksioglu concluded, saying while she agreed with the points, a non-aggressive approach would likely be more effective within her party. A softer tone would go further, she continued, as women's branch members must continue to cooperate with their male colleagues. Panelist Satir agreed. To Eksioglu, she said, "You may not be a politician, but I am," and went on to express her appreciation for the support she'd received from party leadership as the panel concluded. Istanbul Mayor Kadir Topbas, who had arrived in the midst of Eksioglu's call to action, offered closing remarks, getting a dig in by joking that he had volunteered to send "just" his wife, due to his busy schedule, but was told that wasn't enough.

5. (SBU) Comment: The AKP remains a party in which women play a largely ancillary part, doing much of the grassroots spade work, but so far getting no real leadership or decision making roles. However, in contrast to earlier meetings we've observed of AK Party Women's Branches in southeast Turkey, this event was dominated by the Women's Branch, rather than by male party administrators. A few of the participants might have considered Eksioglu's speech provocative and her approach too feminist, but the group appeared to warm to her essential message. At the post-program reception, we discussed an upcoming IV program for Branch VP for Foreign Relations Mutlu Alkan, and also learned of the Women's Branch's plans to create a "Training Academy" for AK Party women candidates in preparation for the next elections. They asked how PAS programming might be able to assist; we will explore with them options for supporting women in politics. JONES